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ABSTRACT

This report analyzes the effect of public participation and the use of third party neutrals on recommendations for reorganization of a large Ontario school system. To reexamine the system, expand programs, and consolidate schools, the board of education commissioned an advisory council in 1984 to obtain community input before making recommendations and to allow intervention by six former school board chairmen acting as neutrals between the board and the community. the council solicited written responses from community members and held meetings. The report concludes that change is difficult for most communities to accept, but that community involvement in decisions that affect them is critical. Most communities view their schools and teachers positively and offer constructive solutions to problems. Delegations were well prepared in expression of their views. Communities generally believe that the methods helped to gain understanding of the educational system. When decisions were made to close schools or to consolidate programs, the public primarily had had its say, although several decisions were unresolved. The third party neutrals deflected public criticism away from the elected trustees, and the former chairmen were accepted as being knowledgeable, thereby removing some of the politics from the politics of education. (CJH)

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THE EFFECT OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND THE
UTILIZATION OF THIRD-PARTY NEUTRALS ON THE
REORGANIZATION OF A LARGE ONTARIO SCHOOL SYSTEM

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Introduction

In 1969, the Province of Ontario completed a consolidation program involving thousands of small school boards resulting in the formation of approximately 125 large city and county administrative units. As one of the new county units, the Carleton Board of Education experienced rapid growth and embarked upon an extensive building program. Recently, with a slowing of the birth rate, some communities have experienced declining enrolments while new communities continued to emerge and to demand equal educational opportunities and facilities.

Although the board of education had developed a school closure policy, it became evident to the administration early in 1983 that the entire system needed to be examined, programs expanded, and school facilities consolidated. Planning staff were instructed to conduct a complete study of the school system and to write a report with recommendations. This report, the Facilities Analysis Staff Study (FASS), was presented to the board in the spring of 1984. At a meeting of the board of education in July, 1984, the six former board chairmen were formally invited to constitute an Advisory Council to obtain community and public input regarding the recommendations of the staff report. The Council was charged with the responsibility to present the staff report, to hold meetings with the community, and to write a report complete with recommendations for consideration by the board. All of the six former chairmen, the author of this paper being one of them, agreed to serve on the Advisory Council and to perform the tasks required by the board. After

further public input regarding the Advisory Council's recommendations in September and October of 1985, the board made its final decisions on October 28, 1985.

Objectives

The purpose of this paper is a comparative analysis which illustrates how participation by the public and the use of third-party neutrals affected the recommendations of professional planning staff with respect to the Carleton Board of Education's system reorganization of programs and facilities.

Rationale

The Facilities Analysis Staff Study (FASS) analyzed the degree to which approved programs are accessible on an equal basis across the system and the degree to which all facilities are utilized and are likely to be utilized during the next five years. Recommendations were made with respect to boundaries, location of programs, and utilization of space. Once the staff report was received by the board, the results of the study were to be shared with the communities before any action by the board was taken. In this light, the task force of the six former board chairmen, known as the Advisory Council on School Facilities and Programs, was charged with the task of receiving community input concerning the recommendations of the staff report.

The utilization of third-party neutrals to effect change is not a revolutionary concept. However, taking advantage of the knowledge and expertise of former school board chairmen is probably unique when a board is required to make political decisions. This study will illustrate how the recommendations by the professional planning staff of the board were affected

by public participation and input, the changes made to the original recommendations because of this participation, and the board of education's final resolution of the matter after further community input.

The literature documents how the involvement of people who are directly affected by decisions improves the quality of the decisions made. In this particular study, the communities affected by the staff's recommendations were consulted and their input carefully analyzed by the Advisory Council before it made its recommendations.

Consolidation of programs, changes in attendance boundaries, equalization of resources, and school closures are recognized in the literature as being political decisions taken by school boards. With respect to the phenomenon of the management of decline, the National Institute of Education in the United States recently published a complete review of the literature (Zerchykov, 1982). In the review, the authors concluded that "All of the literature is integrated around a common understanding of the conflict among political expediency, political feasibility, and the educational soundness of various public options, and of the recurring tensions between technical and political rationality in implementing these options" (p. xv).

Other research seems to indicate that program and school consolidation decisions by school boards can be taken more effectively and successfully when the communities involved are consulted. The use of third-party neutrals who are able to analyze the situation, act as referees and make decisions objectively usually results in more acceptable decision making concerning political matters. Townsend (1980) suggests that community involvement is critical in the politics of decline, Ponder (1981) warns that school boards must seek input from parents concerning possible school closure or court

disaster and Scott, Hickcox and Ryan (1978) support the concept of community participation. Townsend (1982) illustrates how third-party neutrals could be used as effective change agents for school boards.

Methodology

In September of 1984, the Advisory Council met to consider how it might undertake the task assigned to it and to prepare a report for the board. The first requirement was to study the staff report in detail, and determine how best to communicate with the various community groups and interested persons. In order to be seen as neutral and to maintain a discrete independence, an executive assistant was hired to report solely to the Council.

The next step involved publicizing the Council and its purpose and soliciting maximum participation from the affected communities by receiving briefs or letters from interested groups or individuals. The response was overwhelming as sixty-two briefs and 220 letters were received. These submissions were categorized by dividing the board's sixteen secondary schools (18,000 students) and the sixty-two elementary schools (23,000 students) into thirteen clusters of schools for the purpose of holding public meetings.

Prior to the cluster meetings, the Council held three public meetings (East, West and Central) to explain the FASS report generally and to review the procedures involved to receive input by the public at the thirteen cluster meetings. At these meetings, briefs were received and individual ratepayers heard. Some weeks later, the Council met with smaller working groups of one or two representatives from each delegation. In total, twenty-six public meetings were held and often with more than 150 interested persons in attendance. At the second meeting with smaller groups, an opportunity for

more detailed questioning on positions and alternate proposals was possible and opinions between the communities and the Advisory Council exchanged. At the conclusion of every two or three public meetings, the Council met as a group to discuss the briefs and letters from the public and to formulate recommendations complete with supporting rationale. Of the fifty-nine meetings held between September, 1984 and July, 1985, thirty-three were public and twenty-six were committee meetings of the Council. A report of almost one hundred pages with an additional fifty pages of appendices was presented to the board of education at the end of July, 1985.

Following the publication and distribution of the council's report and before any decisions were made, the board held four public Committee of the Whole meetings in September and October of 1985 to gather further public response to the Council's recommendations. The procedure developed by the board allowed each delegation a ten-minute presentation and a further ten-minute discussion period with the trustees. Two further meetings were held to allow for debate by the trustees and the board made its final decisions at a Special Board Meeting held on October 28, 1985.

Three graduate students who were members of the author's politics of education course during the fall semester of 1985 undertook a project to monitor the seven public meetings of the board, to analyse the decision-making process and to determine the effect of public participation and the utilization of former school board chairmen as third-party neutrals on the reorganization of the school system.

The comparative analysis which follows illustrates the changes which did occur at each stage of the decision-making process including: 1) the school system's facilities and programs in each school as they now exist in

1985-1986; 2) the recommendations of the Facilities Analysis Staff Study (July, 1984); 3) the recommendations of the Advisory Council of former school board chairmen following a year of consultation with the public (July, 1985); and 4) the final decisions by the school board following further public input (October 28, 1985). Some conclusions will be drawn from the analysis and the importance of public participation and the utilization of former school board chairmen acting as third-party neutrals will be discussed.

Data Sources

The data sources include: 1) the original Facilities Analysis Staff Study (FASS); 2) the sixty-two briefs and 220 letters submitted to the Advisory Council; 3) the Advisory Council's Report and Recommendations on School Facilities and Programs; 4) the seven public board meetings held to receive further public input and trustee debate; and 5) the board's final decisions regarding the school system's reorganization.

Results

A comparative analysis illustrating what happened at each stage of the process follows in Figure 1. The grade organization for each of the sixty-two elementary schools are shown as K-5, K-6, K-8, 6-8 and 7-8. Schools that provide Early French Immersion (EFI) have the grades where the program is available indicated by () while those providing Late French Immersion (LFI) underlined _____. For example, some middle schools in Figure 1 are "triple-track" and provide English programs as 6-8, Early French Immersion continuing from K-5 as (6-8) and Late French Immersion as 7-8.

A detailed analysis and commentary concerning the decision-making process at each stage for the sixty-two elementary schools is available in a 126-page report prepared by the research assistants. Space, in this paper, does not permit a complete discussion of each school or the thirteen clusters. Therefore, more attention is devoted to a discussion of the process itself.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON: STATUS QUD 1985-86 /F.A.S.S./ADVISORY COUNCIL/FINAL DECISION

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS	1985-86	F.A.S.S.	Advisory Council	Final Decision
Barrhaven	K-5 (K-5)	(K-5)	K-5 (K-5)	K-5 (K-5)
Bayshore	K-6	K-6	K-6 <u>6-6</u>	K-6
Bells Corners	K-5, 6	(K-6), <u>7-6</u>	K-5	K-6
Blackburn	K-5	K-5	closure	deferred
Blossom Park	K-6	K-6	K-6	K-6
Briargreen	K-6	K-5	closure	deferred
Brooklane	K-5	(K-6), <u>7-6</u>	K-5	K-5
Carson Grove	K-5	K-5	K-5*	K-5
Century	K-6	K-5	K-5	K-6
City View	K-5	K-5	closure	deferred
Convent Glen	K-5 (K-5)	(K-5)	K-5 (K-5)	K-5 (K-5)
Dunning-Foubert	(K-7)**	(K-6), <u>7-6</u>	(K-6)	(K-6)
Fairfield	to house Seraphin-Marion	closed - use for Fr. Alt./Adult Day	closed - use for S. Maitron*	_____
Fisher Heights	K-6	closed - use for Eng. Alt./Adult Day	closure	closed
Fitzroy Centennial	K-6, <u>7-6</u>	K-6	K-6, <u>6-6</u>	K-6, <u>7-6</u>
Glen Cairn	K-6	(K-5)	K-6	K-6
Glen Ogilvie	K-5 (K-5)	(K-6), <u>7-6</u>	K-5 (K-5)	K-5 (K-5)
Goulbourn Township	K-6, <u>7-6</u>	K-6	6-6 (6-6) <u>6-6</u>	6-6 (6-6) <u>6-6</u>
Graham Park	leased to Nepean	Retain pending Woodroffe Community	-	_____
Greely	K-5	(K-6), <u>7-6</u>	K-5	K-6
Huntley	K-6	K-6	K-6	K-6
Jockvale	K-7 (K-7)**	K-5	K-6 (K-6)	

* Board approved eff Sept. 1985
 ** To become K-6 (K-6) in 1986/87

() = EPI
10 = LPI

TABLE 1

COMPARISON: STATUS QUO 1985-86 / F.A.S.S. / ADVISORY COUNCIL / FINAL DECISION

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS	1985-86	F.A.S.S.	Advisory Council	Final Decision
John Young	K-5 (K-5)	K-5	K-6 (K-6)	K-5 (K-5)
Kars	(K-5)	(K-5)	(K-5)	(K-5)
Katimavik	(K-6), <u>7-8</u>	(K-6), <u>7-8</u>	(K-6) <u>6-8</u>	(K-6) <u>7-8</u>
Knoxdale	(K-6)	K-5	(K-5)	(K-5)
Lakeview	(K-5)	(K-5)	(K-5)	(K-5)
L.D. Billings	(K-5)	closed - use for Seraphin-Marion	K-5*	(K-5)
Le Phare	(K-5)	(K-5)	(K-5)**	(K-5)
Leslie Park	K-6	K-5	K-5	K-6
Manordale	K-6	K-6	K-5	K-6
Manotick	K-5 (K-5)	(K-6), <u>7-8</u>	K-5 (K-5)	K-5 (K-5)
Meadowview	K-6	K-6	K-6	K-6
Merivale	K-6 (K-6)	closed - retain for community/future use	K-5 (K-5)	deferred
Metcalf	K-6	K-6	K-6	K-6
Munster	K-5	K-5	K-5	K-5
North Gower/ Marlborough	K-5	K-5	K-5	K-5
Orleans wood	K-5 (K-5)	(K-5), <u>7-8</u>	(K-5)	K-5 (K-5)
Osgoode	K-5	K-6	K-5	K-6
Parkwood hills	(K-6)	(K-6), <u>7-8</u>	(K-5)	(K-6)
Queenswood	K-6	K-5	K-5	K-5
Ramsayville	K-6	K-6	(K-6) <u>6-8</u>	(K-6)
Richmond	K-5	K-5	K-5	K-5
Riverview	K-6	(K-6), <u>7-8</u>	K-6	K-6
Robert Hopkins	K-5	(K-6), <u>7-8</u>	K-5*	K-5

NB: () = merged
 = split

TABLE 1

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	1985-1986	F.A.S.S.	Advisory Council	Final Decision
Roland Michener	K-8	K-8	K-8	K-8
Seraphin-Marion	K-8 FL (located in Fairfield PS)	K-8 FL (located in L.D. Billings)	to Fairfield PS facility	to Fairfield
Sir J.A. Macdonald	K-1, <u>3-5</u>	closed - use as Teachers Centre	closure	closed
Stephen Leacock	(K-8), <u>7-8</u>	(K-8), <u>7-8</u>	(K-8) <u>6-8</u>	(K-8) <u>7-8</u>
Stittsville	K-8 (K-2)	(K-8), <u>7-8</u>	K-5 (K-5)	K-5 (K-5)
Terry Fox	K-8	K-8	K-8	K-8
Torbolton	K-8	(K-8), <u>7-8</u>	K-8	
W.E. Johnston	K-8	K-8	K-8	K-8
MIDDLE SCHOOL	1985-1986	F.A.S.S.	Advisory Council	Final Decision
D.A. Moodie	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8</u>	K-8	6-8 (6-8)	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8</u>
Emily Carr	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8</u>	K-8	6-8 (6-8) <u>6-8</u>	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8</u>
Greenbank	7-8 (7-8) <u>7-8</u>	(6-8) <u>7-8</u>	6-8 (6-8) <u>6-8</u>	7-8 (7-8) <u>7-8</u>
Henry Munro	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8</u>	K-8	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8*</u>	6-8 (6-8) <u>7-8</u>
Meadowlands	6-8 <u>7-8</u>	K-8	6-8 (6-8) <u>6-8</u>	6-8 (6-8) Review (7-8)
Rideau Valley	6-8 (6-8)	K-8	6-8 (6-8) <u>6-8</u>	6-8 (6-8) <u>6-8</u>
Sir Winston Churchill	7-8 (7-8)	K-8	6-8 (6-8) <u>6-8</u>	7-8 (7-8)

NB: () = EFI
 = LFI

Discussion and Conclusions

Based upon the original Facilities Analysis Staff Study (FASS) commissioned by the board and presented in July, 1984, this paper has documented the changes which occurred as the result of public participation and the intervention of six former school board chairmen acting as third-party neutrals between the board and the community. It became obvious that change is a difficult concept for most communities to accept. The staff report, with its many broad and sweeping changes, provoked intense community reaction and controversy. The study of these proposed changes over the course of more than one year, the result of "third-party neutral" intervention, the involvement of the affected communities, and the political process itself proved to be a fascinating experience.

In an attempt to balance the conflicting forces among a sense of community, fiscal responsibility, and cost efficiency, the board finally ratified a plan which largely maintained the status quo yet did bring about some change. A cynic might argue that the process was of little use, and perhaps destructive, in relation to the amount of change achieved. While acknowledging some of the negative concerns, some positive changes did occur as the result of the process of community involvement.

One encouraging feature in the process of public participation was the praise from almost all communities concerning their local schools and their teachers. In most instances, during the Advisory Council's deliberations with affected communities and the board's Committee of the Whole public meetings, was the fact that the majority of the communities were satisfied with the education being provided by the board and a desire by them to "leave us alone". When a problem area was identified, the community often suggested

very positive and constructive solutions to ameliorate their concerns. Other new areas requiring change emerged as a result of the process and some of these issues will require the board to make different and more difficult decisions in the near future.

Many positive comments were received from the communities expressing their appreciation for the Advisory Council's neutrality, concern and knowledge of the issues, and for the board's open-minded attitude and genuine interest concerning the opinions of the ratepayers. Most communities believed that the process of public involvement and the utilization of former school board chairman helped them to gain a better understanding of their educational system and the way in which it is organized and delivers programs. Many believed that the process strengthened their community and school organizations and forced a joining together of adjacent but previously unrelated groups. Some of the most powerful and forceful input came from the joint submissions of several school and community groups within a cluster of schools.

A significant number of the sixty-two briefs and 220 letters received by the Advisory Council and the numerous representations made to the board during its final deliberations were of high calibre. In almost every instance, the delegations and individuals were well-prepared and very articulate in the expression of their views. A variety and range of techniques were utilized including professionally prepared briefs, accurate facts and figures, charts and overhead transparencies. In many instances, they were superior to those prepared by the professional board staff. The follow-up meetings the Advisory Council held with small representative groups of the large community were particularly productive in the search for solutions to problems. In the later

public forums, the usual threat of electoral sanction on the trustees at the impending municipal election occasionally surfaced.

The length of the public participation process, the utilization of former board chairmen as "third-party neutral" arbitrators, and the extent of community input seemed to temper the emotions aroused by the original staff report. The Advisory Council acted as a buffer between the community and the board and it appeared to keep public emotion at a distance from the trustees. This "cooling out" procedure and the venting of emotions on third-party neutrals should not be underestimated when one observes the kind of bitter acrimony that some boards seem to have endured in their attempts to consolidate facilities. When board decisions were finally made to close schools or to consolidate programs, the public generally had had its say and accepted the decisions graciously.

Although the Advisory Council succeeded in deflecting most of the public criticism from the trustees and made its decisions based on more rational judgements, the political role of the trustees became more apparent in the final public Committee of the Whole meetings preceding final decisions by the board. As was to be expected, some behaved as typical "ward" representatives when submissions from their particular demographic area were presented. Often, they would voice a willingness to meet separately with individuals or groups to obtain a better understanding of the issues from that particular delegation. There was some evidence of "caucusing" or mutual consultation with other members of the board before final votes were taken. One would hope that the trustees would be more global or system-oriented but such was not the case in many instances. Other political action was observed during the final decisions period including: the motion to close a school being made by a

retiring trustee; a public promise to introduce a motion of re-consideration if re-elected; the posturing for camera-time when the public meetings were televised; and often the decision to vote against a motion publicly while supporting it privately. Trustee attendance at all of the seven final public meetings was particularly high.

During the more than one year of hearings by the Advisory Council and the public meetings preceding the final decisions by the board, the administrative and planning staff of the board maintained an apparent low profile. The staff did, however, play a prominent role in providing back-up material and information to the Advisory Council and for the trustees. Although the Council operated with the assistance of an executive assistant on contract to it, his office was located within the administrative offices and access to senior administrators and planning staff was assured. Many comprehensive documents were provided to the Advisory Council and the trustees to assist them with the decision-making process. The Advisory Council often met with planning staff to discuss possible recommendations before they were finally made.

At the final decision-making board meeting held on October 28, 1985 the chairman of the board called the activities of all concerned parties a "soul-searching process" and claimed that "due process had taken its course and that some hard decisions had been made". However, it was evident that several "hard" decisions had been postponed particularly involving the closing of three schools. Action was taken on the closing of two schools where the community had finally accepted the decision. Many other issues went unresolved in spite of recommendations from the Advisory council including the grade structure of some schools, the extension of Late French Immersion to

grade 6, junior kindergarten, the English program in general, single, dual or triple-track configurations for middle schools and some elementary schools, the affect of French Immersion on English proficiency and special education for French Immersion students. Several questions were raised and were unresolved such as: What are the costs involved in the decisions that were made? What effect will further school consolidations have on current configurations? What are the staff and transportation implications concerning the decisions? Will the board face legal action, as other boards have, with respect to the closure decisions? and, most importantly, Will the public now expect this high level of involvement in other board decisions? and Will the process become a precedence-setting procedure?

In the closed system that prevailed a decade or two ago, there is no doubt that the public accepted expert staff and elected representative decisions without reservation. In today's open atmosphere of public participation in decision making, such is no longer the case. The public not only wants to be heard it demands to be involved.

In my opinion, the use of former school board chairmen as third-party neutrals worked. It deflected much of the public criticism away from the trustees and the former chairmen were generally accepted as being knowledgeable, aware of the problems and objective in their decision making. It certainly removed some of the politics from very political decisions. The time and space given to the input from the public defused concerns that decisions had been made without adequate study or that decisions had been "rammed down the public's throat". It is doubtful, however, that former school board chairmen would continue on a regular basis to act as third-party neutrals without remuneration. The experience was interesting but very

time-consuming for the old "war horses", as they called themselves, to give freely of their time. What did become evident in the process was that community involvement in decisions which affect them is critical in the "Politics of Education". In this light, the local newspaper, The Ottawa Citizen, praised the board for its approach to a system reorganization particularly when it involved extensive school program modifications and school closures.